

Athens

Various resources were used to compile this article, including the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

Athens was the most important city of Attica in ancient times, the capital of the same district in New Testament times, and the capital of the Republic of Greece in the modern era. The name has been derived, so it would seem, from that of the patron goddess Athena (Minerva).

The city of Athens is important to biblical studies as the scene of Paul's famous Areopagus address (Acts 17:15-34). Having been driven from Berea by the antagonism of the Jews, Paul waited in Athens for the arrival of his companions, who had remained in Berea for a short time. It is not known whether Athens was included in Paul's program of evangelization or whether the opportunity and stimulus for his preaching in that city were provided by the circumstances he encountered.

The account in Acts does not make clear whether Paul approached Athens by land or by sea. If he came by sea he would have landed at Piraeus, which was the seaport of Athens and the base for her navy. Located 5 mi (8 km) from Athens, Piraeus was joined to the city by a corridor about 250 ft (75 m) wide protected by walls about 50 ft (15 m) high. Most likely Paul would have traveled outside these walls in a northeasterly direction, on the road leading to Athens. On this road Pausanias claims to have observed "altars to gods called unknown."

The existence of inscriptions worded in the singular in accordance with the statement of Paul (Acts 17:23) has been questioned. McDonald, however, asserts knowledge of two late literary passages that refer to an unknown god (BA, 4 [1941], 1). Coming by this way, Paul would have entered the city from the west through the "dipylon" (double gate), from which a road continuing to the southeast led directly to the agora.

The agora in an ancient city was the focal point of political, commercial, and social life. Here, as well as in the synagogue, Paul engaged in discussion

with the people, conspicuous among whom were the Stoics and Epicureans. The agora was a large open space enclosed by civic and religious buildings. Modern excavators have discovered the foundations of buildings that correspond substantially with the description of the agora given by the historian Pausanias. Among these were the Odeion, or music hall, the stoa of Attalos on the east, and two long parallel stoas on the south. A stoa was a long narrow pavilion with a colonnade on one side and a wall on the other. The stoas were the scene of public lectures and discussions. The circular Tholos on the west was the meeting place of the executive sections of the Athenian Council of five hundred. Also on the west were: the Bouleuterion, where the Council met; the Metroön, the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods; the temple of Apollo Patroös; and the stoa of Zeus Eleutherios. The temple of Ares was toward the center of the open area of the agora.

The AREOPAGUS was directly S of the agora, and the Acropolis was to the southeast. The Acropolis, a commanding hill 512 ft (156 m) high was customarily approached from the west, through an ornamental gateway known as the Propylaea. Here on the south stood the small temple of Wingless Victory. The top of the hill was dominated by the Parthenon, which contained a gold and ivory statue of Athena made by Phidias, Pericles' sculptor. The Erechtheion stood on the north. This was a temple erected in honor of Erechtheus, the semi divine hero who is reputed to have been the first king of Athens, though we cannot be sure that he was more than a legendary character. The Prytaneion, or town hall, where the sacred fire of the city was always kept aflame, was on the north slope of the Acropolis, E of the Agora. North of the Prytaneion the Roman Forum was built through the generosity of the Caesars, Julius and Augustus. When Paul visited Athens, the temple of Olympian Zeus stood unfinished, SE of the Acropolis. When it was completed, this structure, known as the Olympion, was the largest temple in all Greece. The Odeion, or music hall of Pericles, and the theater

of Dionysos stood S and SW of the Acropolis, respectively. The temple of Hephaestus was located W of the agora on a small hill known as the Kolonos Agoraios. In the past this temple has been identified wrongly, at times, as the temple of Theseus. That it is indeed the Hephaisteion, the temple of the god of fire and metallurgy, has been confirmed by the discovery of numerous metalworking shops on the slopes of the hill on which it stands. The Acropolis, which is ideally situated for defense and water supply, bears evidence of having been inhabited from earliest times.

See further in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia and in the Wikipedia article on Athens.

Athens, one of the greatest cultural centers of Paul's day, grew up around a 520-foot-high rocky plateau called the Acropolis. Here, on this elevated area, stood the many-columned Parthenon, the far-famed architectural wonder, and so many other sacred edifices that the place was called "the many-templed Acropolis."

To the north of the Acropolis was the celebrated civic center and market place, known as the Agora, where people not only traded, but also visited and discussed questions of interest at the time. To the northwest there extended out from the Acropolis, on a somewhat lower level, a rocky hill called the Areopagus, or Mars' Hill, where the councils and the High Court met.

This limestone hill is situated between the Acropolis and the Agora. In Roman mythology Mars was the god of war; his counterpart in Greek mythology was Ares. Many translations of the Bible will use the word "Areopagus" instead of the phrase "Mars' Hill" when describing this location. The word "Areopagus" means "the hill of Ares."

Both of these well-known places were familiar to Paul. In the Agora he 'disputed daily with them that met with him,' among whom were the Stoics and Epicureans, who, with mingled admiration and curiosity, regarded him as "a setter forth of strange gods"; therefore brought him up the hill to speak before and to be heard by an informal session of the supreme court. Standing in the midst of

Mars' Hill, before these representatives of the best learning of the earth, Paul took as his text "the Unknown God," and delivered, with telling effect, one of the most dynamic messages of all time. Some mocked, some were deeply impressed, while others were converted then and there.

According to Luke, the apostle Paul only paid one visit to this city. However, by the time Paul got to Athens most of its glory had already passed—most of Greece had been plundered by the Romans, and even Athens had been sacked by Sulla in 86 BC. While Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to join him at Athens, he traveled through the ancient city and was appalled by the high degree of paganism in the city. An ancient Proverb claimed that there were more gods in Athens than men, and wherever Paul looked he could see "that the city was given over to idols" (Acts 17:16). Paul then "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17).

Finally, he had the opportunity to address the philosophers on Mars' Hill and there proclaimed to them "God, who made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24).

Thanks to the American School of Classical Studies, the Agora has been uncovered, its streets have been charted, and its ruined buildings identified. The visitor may now walk among these ruins and contemplate the past.

The thirty-five stone steps carved in the rock up Mars' Hill, and traces of an altar and many rock benches on top of the hill, are visible today. Thousands of tourists from all parts of the world climb these self-same steps and, standing on Mars' Hill, are even now visibly moved by the words as well as the spirit and power of Paul's mighty address.

Away to the southwest is the ancient roadway leading to Corinth.

No remains of an altar inscription – "To the Unknown God," referred to by Paul, have as yet been found in Athens, but an identical inscription on an altar was found in 1903 during the excavations of the city of Pergamum.